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Citation for final published version:

Önen, Naz 2019. Essay film as a dialogical form. JOMEC Journal (13) , pp. 93-103. 10.18573/jomec.188 file

Publishers page: <https://jomec.cardiffuniversitypress.org/articles/...>
<<https://jomec.cardiffuniversitypress.org/articles/abstract/10.18573/jomec.188/>>

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JOMEC Journal

Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Published by Cardiff University Press

Essay Film as a Dialogical Form

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Keywords

Essay Film
Dialogue
Voice-Over
Audience
Narrative

Abstract

The essay film is one emerging genre in which the sonic elements and the editing characteristics are constructing the basis of its communication structure within and beyond the audiovisual material. This paper will enlighten the unique language and the means of communication of the essay form. In the essay film, the voice functions as a means of expression as opposed to a stack of sounds. With the support of the editing elements, the voice becomes a stylistic reflection towards the world, where the audience perceives the tone of the filmmaker. The voice is also not a rhetoric that oppresses the viewer but functions as a bridge to communicate with, and throughout, the audiovisual material as an artistic act that demands an intellectual response, like an open letter to be finalized in the viewers' mind. The essay film does not seek to provide answers. Rather, it asks questions to the viewer, directly or indirectly, throughout the dialogue as the core of this filmmaking style. For the filmmaker to communicate with their viewer effectively, they position themselves as part of the audience. The essay film strives to go beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Its structure undermines traditional boundaries, and is both structurally and conceptually transgressive, as well as self-reflective. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself – whether film, video, or digital electronic. This work highlights the dialogical characteristics of the essay film through a selection of essay film works with a focus on the voiceover usage and editing characteristics, to understand how a body of essayistic work addresses the viewer for a dialogical relationship.

Contributor Note

Naz Önen works as a Research Assistant in Başkent University's Communication and Design Department. Currently a Ph.D. student at Hacettepe University's Communication Sciences Program, she graduated from Bilkent University's Media and Design MFA Program. She has directed and produced several short films, took part in national and international film festivals in addition to photography and new media exhibitions. Her current research areas are focused on Alternative Photographic Processes, Family Photography, Media Archeology, Found Footage and Essay Film.

Citation

Önen, Naz. 2019. Essay Film as a Dialogical Form. *JOMEC Journal* 13: 'Dialogue and Communication in Film', 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.18573/jomec.188>.

Accepted for publication 1st December 2018.

The Language of Essay Film

This section focuses on some key characteristics of the essay film to distinguish its aesthetics and language from other filmic forms. Thus, it examines the artistic and intellectual act behind the construction of the essay film to differentiate this essayistic representation from other genres. Unlike the commentary and one directional characteristic of the conventional documentary voiceover, the voiceover of the essay film functions as an intellectual tool to build a dialogical relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer, acting as one of the interactive features of the medium.

The film essay is a relatively recent genre which was first conceptualized in 1940 by the avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter in his short essay entitled 'The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film' as a genre that problematizes binary categories of representation of feature and documentary form (Alter 2003, 12). There are various discussions on defining the characteristics of the essay film. Such discussions also tackle the essay film as a genre¹. According to Ursula Biemann (2003, 8), the essay genre situates itself somewhere between documentary video and video art. She mentions that essay films are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective for documentary genre, and for an art video, they stand out for being

socially involved or explicitly political. The film essay has very similar characteristics to the written essay form, which was conceptualized by Michel de Montaigne in his famous work from 1580 called *Essays*.

[Michel de] Montaigne justifies the use of the word that categorize his writings, explaining that they should be approached as tentative efforts at finding the truth about something. In this respect, the essays are quite literally texts in which the essayist tries to figure out what he or she thinks about something based on personal experience. He uses the term judgment that is his ability to conceptualize his own experience. Therefore the essayist has a constant reassessment of his ideas keeping him from reaching and on disputable Truth (Montero 2012, 6).

The etymology of the term essay is related to trying out or experimenting. The image of the essay as a way of testing one's ideas was already present in Montaigne's theorization of the form (Montero 2012, 8). From the philosophical-literary form, 'to essay' means 'to assay', 'to weigh' as well as 'to attempt', suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search, which is constrained by the presence of individual subjectivity. From this point of view, the essay form poaches across disciplinary borders, transgresses conceptual and formal norms and does not follow a clear narrative trajectory.

Nora Alter (2003) highlights how the essay film self-reflexively offers its own film criticism. In her film *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*) made in 2000, Agnès Varda uses a self-reflexive method to conceptualize her work through the act of 'collecting' while self-

¹ Reda Bensmaïa defines the essay as a genre which seems to flirt with all the genres without letting himself be pinned down and underlines once more that 'it has become practically impossible to subsume a single definitive type of text under this term' (Montero 2012, 5). The essay is seen as a hybrid form which is recalling the operation of memory and dream-work (Alter 2003, 12).

positioning herself as the collector of the audiovisual material and as an artist. *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*) (2000) offers an intimate, picaresque inquiry into French life as lived by the country's poor and its provident, as well as by the film's own director, Varda. The aesthetic, political and moral point of departure for Varda are gleaners – those individuals who pick at already-reaped fields for the odd potato, the leftover turnip.



Image 1: Scene from *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*) by Varda.

Knowing that the essayist practice is highly self-reflexive and constantly reconsidering the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning, it is consciously engaged in the activity of representing itself. These characteristics make the genre particularly suited to study complex relations. Essayist work does not primarily aim to document realities but to organize their complexities (Biemann 2003, 10). These complexities are offered to the reader in an intellectual format as a result of the thoughtful and artistic act of combining elements. In the scene near the ending of Varda's film (see Image 1), there is a windy moment, where there are two women from the museum, holding a painting of the gleaners and carrying their wheat during the wind. This scene doubles the meaning of the painting, by recreating a modern representation of gleaners from the perspective of

museum workers holding the piece of art. Throughout this film, Varda highlights her own position as a filmmaker who collects moments on film on several occasions.



Image 2: Scene from *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*) by Agnes Varda

In the 1910 letter called 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', George Lukacs mentions the written essay as 'criticism as a form of art' and characterizes the essay as both 'accidental' and 'necessary' (Alter 2003, 12). Theodor Adorno² later examines this concept in his writings where he focuses on the 'luck', 'play' and 'irrational' characteristics of the essay. Both Lukacs and Adorno see the essay as fragmentary, and wandering, as well as a form that does not seek to advance truth claims like the documentary genre's approach in the case of film. Lukacs concludes that the essay is both a work of art – due to what he calls its autonomous, 'sovereign' status – and a judgment. For Lukacs, the essential, value-determining feature of an essay is that it is not the verdict but the process of judging. For Adorno, the fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture in the essay film which might be driven towards different directions

² Adorno develops Lukacs' argument on the essay further as a 'critique of system' that problematizes the 'absolute privilege of method' (Alter 2003, 13).

(Alter 2003, 12). Kirsten Johnston also uses this self-reflexive narrative in her film *Cameraperson* (2016). Johnston draws the big picture of her film, by placing herself as both the subject and the author of her film, like the way Varda tells her own story as a filmmaker. These two filmmakers tell their own stories in an essayistic manner, with no intentions of proving any ideas or forcing storylines on to the viewer.



Image 3: Scene from *Cameraperson* by Johnston

The essay film portrays a critical approach that tests the possibility of theory building through visual means and the videos are being used not in an illustrative manner but in a wide range of artistic, poetic, humorous and sometimes rather absurd ways (Biemann 2003, 9). Parallel to August Wilhelm von Schlegel's declaration that a theory about the novel should be a novel, Small believes³ that a theory of film should be a film (Alter 2003, 13). The essay film has the characteristic of 'openness' which can be seen as the notion of leaving doors open to any new kind of perception and understanding by the viewer. An active spectator is much needed in this film since it has a complex narrative to be revealed by the viewer.

³ The film critic Edward Small refers to the audio-visual critical practice of the essay film as 'direct theory' (Biemann 2003, 9).

The following section focuses on the usage of dialogic elements in order to understand how the essay form addresses the viewer.

Dialogic Elements in the Essay Film

In first-person and essayistic nonfiction cinema, a voiceover has had an overwhelmingly negative reception in documentary film theory (Rascaroli 2011, 1). Laura Rascaroli (2011) proposes to explore the interstitial space that a voiceover creates between the text on which it comments and the audience it addresses. In the first-person and essayistic nonfiction, this sonic space becomes the place from which the spectator may establish a relationship with the speaking subject and negotiate between the superimposed commentary and the images that are commented upon (Rascaroli 2011, 2). What the voiceover brings out, ultimately, is a series of interstices – between fiction and documentary, hypotext and hypertext, empirical author and narrator, the space of the diegesis and the space of the enunciator (Rascaroli 2011, 9). The voiceover in the essay film not only speaks to the audience but also highlights inner problems or concerns of the essayist.

Following the earliest conceptualization on essay in the literature by Montaigne, the essayist builds an act of self-discovery with a focus on certain subject matters. Far from being an example of didactic and authoritative voice-of-god, commentary's voiceover is a supple tool that linguistically uses effect to produce intellectual and emotional results, provoking reflection and establishing a dialogue with the audience. Chris Marker is known for his essay films and uses the

'I' language in his works, such as *Sans Soleil* (1983), where he uses the camera as a tool to communicate with a stranger (see Image 4).



Image 4: Scene from *Sans Soleil* by Marker

Rascaroli (2011) highlights that the essay film narrative is far away from a didactic and authoritative voice-of-god commentary. She sees the essayistic voiceover as a supportive tool for producing intellectual and emotional results while establishing a dialogue with the audience (Rascaroli 2011, 4). For her, the essayistic voiceover asks many questions but only offers few or partial answers. In addition, it has the function of inserting a distance to carve a space not only between enunciator and enunciation, but also between spectator and text. Following the theorization of the essay film as a thought provoking text and a collective experience, one can describe the voiceover in the essay film as a dialogical tool. Rascaroli focuses on the sonic space of dialogue as a place where the spectator may establish a relationship with the speaking subject and negotiate between the superimposed commentary and the images that are commented upon (Rascaroli 2011, 2). Therefore, the image and the spoken word are expanded when the finished body of work has an audience.



Image 5: Scene from *Tokyo-Ga* by Wenders

A good example of this could be Wim Wenders' film *Tokyo-Ga* (1985). The director travels to Japan after being inspired by the work of director Yasujiro Ozu in search of the Tokyo seen in Ozu's films. The film has intense levels of voiceover in which we perceive the commentary of Wenders throughout his experience of the City while he witnesses the everyday life in Tokyo following Ozu's traces. The essay film narration is not sound studio-recorded, and aims to illustrate a private, intimate dialogue which is seen as a direct communication and a thoughtful reflection by Rascaroli (2011). The voiceover has a commentary style in which Wenders questions concepts, such as reality, dreams or games, often asking questions or sharing his considerations. There are many questions offered directly to the audience from his own voiceover in relation to the ongoing themes of entertainment industry, memory, and filmmaking (see Image 5).



Image 6: Scene from *Tokyo-Ga* by Wenders

The sonic space opened up in *Tokyo-Ga* portrays Wenders' experiences of the everyday troubles of Japan throughout the movie and how he places himself within the essay film self-reflexively as the second layer of perception. In Wenders' words, 'the more you watch Japanese television, the more you feel it's watching you' (see Image 6). On the one hand, he is facing Japanese television with an awareness of the filmic world, and, on the other hand, he is placing the audience with an awareness of them communicating with this information through the audiovisual material. This portrays an interesting narration since the television theme has been used in many fiction films, such as *Videodrome* (1983), *Old Boy* (2003), *Blade Runner* (1982) and TV series *Black Mirror* (2011). These fiction storylines place the television as a supporting metaphor for the narrative to deliver some information beyond this concept. However, Wenders creates a rather personal dialogue with the viewer without denying his own position in *Tokyo-Ga* as a subject in front of the television. The same theme delivers different meanings with the essayistic approach where the meanings are not authoritatively established, but radically called into question, offered to the spectator's reflection, and opened up to the new (Rascaroli 2011, 9).

Due to this approach, the spectator has more space to deal with a certain topic without the pressure of an author suppressing their ideas on the essay film. On the one hand, the analysis of its dialogic elements reveals that the essay becomes a sort of inner speech where the threads used by the essayist in their meditation are laid out in full view. On the other hand, it offers the threads to the viewer to use them for 'measuring' their own experience. This helps the viewer generate new intellectual connections and ideas when the essay film provides artistic shape for conceptualizing what they see and experience, using what they know or have heard.

The following section focuses on the editing characteristic of the essay film, which is as crucial as the voiceover in creating a meaningful composition.

The Essayistic Montage

Jean Luc Godard sees the essay film as 'a form that thinks' through connecting different elements (Montero 2012, 1). The essayistic character of this 'form that thinks' is a bond building attitude through revealing some information, filled with moments of discovery for both the author and the viewer. The tone of the filmmaker and the intellectual act – driven by the aesthetic decisions – are not only based on cinematography and the soundscape; the very act of the author as a 'combiner of meanings' and could be seen in an essayistic montage which might be presented within a non-linear style. The essay film is a puzzle of meanings, created by the filmmaker for the viewer to be resolved by taking part in the audiovisual experience, through the received information. Therefore, the

essayistic dialogue could only be reached when *the right combinations*⁴ are made with the editing. This editing could also be a dialectic montage in which the presented audiovisual material does not serve a linear narrative trajectory but could be representing a third meaning to be revealed by the viewer.

Max Bense introduces the essayist not only as an author but also, above all, in their capacity as a combiner. The essay is the result of the conception of literature as an *ars combinatoria* in different configurations around a particular object (Montero 2012, 8). Likewise, Adorno mentions how the essay does not progress in a single direction; instead, he believes that the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The example of a carpet is essential in the understanding of the essay form, and it is also relevant to the film *Passing Drama* (1999) by Angela Melitopoulos. In her work, Melitopoulos relates the editing process to the concept of memory, to question the incidents of her life like the migration theme. It is possible to expand or compress certain fragments of time. By forming intervals, memory brings the past into the present, letting 'the dead' appear in 'the living'. In the formation of these intervals, Melitopoulos uses the visual act of carpet making as the synonym of her conceptual act as the digital montage. In her work, there are several references to the overall theme of migration, and the visual references

are part of the aesthetics. When someone in the film is talking about migration and the incident when people had to leave their homes in a short time, the scene is interrupted by glitched images and digital sound manipulations. This portrays an essayistic manipulation over the audiovisual material in correlation with the core theme of migration. Thus, the author not only speaks through the sound of its subjects, but also through her editing decisions.



Image 7: Scene from *Passing Drama* by Melitopoulos

The video camera and montage can be described as a technical system that simulates the neurological function of memory (Melitopoulos 2008). At one level, the video *Passing Drama* is the construction of a mental space in which memories, active and passive forces interact with one another, as they do in the cerebral system. Images and sounds work as the powers of memory. Instead of creating a homogeneous continuity, transitions between the different visual and narrative levels were used in *Passing Drama* to visualize the process of forgetting or the awareness that something has been forgotten (Lazzarato & Melitopoulos 2003, 121). According to Henri Bergson, memory is a form of accumulated time used to introduce a

⁴ The right combinations are not necessarily linear narratives, they have a sense of poetry where the moments fit with one another, in an intellectual, meaning making harmony. Works like Marker's *Immemory* (1997) might be presented as interactive works in which there is not only one right combination, but each act of montage offers a unique experience.

selection. Perception functions within these 'syntheses of time' (Lazzarato & Melitopoulos 2003, 121). The montage functions as a system of contracting and expanding these flows of time which can be intentionally influenced because relations and durations of time are manipulated in the montage and ten seconds of material can be generated from one second of material. The camera and montage are thus the two essential types of memory that Henri Bergson defines in his *Matière et Mémoire* (1993). With the focus on memory, they explain the concept behind the practice:

We work with visual relationships and intensities generated through layering. We trigger a different relationship to linearity that corresponds to memory. One speaks of intensifying images and sound, of the associative potential and the different connectivities of visual relationships. This corresponds to our perceptual capacity, in which the power of our gaze changes things. It also corresponds to our memory, which allows us to transform a moment into hours, days or months. We finally touch upon the question of the ecology of the mind, which shapes our memory (Lazzarato, Melitopoulos 2003, 124).

In the following section, the text focuses on the author and where he/she places himself/herself in relation to the audiovisual material. In addition to the act of editing, other radical decisions, including the essayist's aim of extending authorship to the audience, will be examined to understand the dialogical relationship between the author and the viewer.

Dialogical Relationship with the Spectator

In her book *The Personal Camera* (2009), Rascaroli looks at Harun Farocki's work to understand the essayist as a spectator. She mentions how Farocki positions himself as a spectator on the same level as the audience rather than as an enunciator or as a narrator⁵ (Rascaroli 2009, 56). His critical engagement opens up spacial temporalities where people who get used to the documentary voiceover manipulation can have an intellectual thought process. Through several aspects, Farocki distances himself from the subject matter as a strategy of debunking his own enunciational authority to enter a dialogical relationship with the spectator and empower them (Rascaroli 2009, 57). The new empowered spectator has the freedom to embrace the information given according to the subjective perception.

Christa Blümlinger also focuses on Farocki's work and how it arranges new images in a game of repetition and difference that initially confronts the viewer as a puzzle. The puzzle form is one of the most appropriate for the essay film genre, since it has a very similar structure and aim to a puzzle as a fragmentary, non-linear text that is opened up to the viewer's perception. Blümlinger mentions how Farocki's film work follows the essay-film tradition of Chris Marker (Blümlinger 2003, 114) through the deployment of diverse and apparently fragmentary images, a

⁵ Rascaroli sees Farocki inscribed in his film not like a director but as a critical spectator, as a historian of the film and the one who is located at a temporal and critical distance from the images (Rascaroli 2009, 62).

narration which interrogates as much as it explains or describes those images, a constant circling back and repetition, re-reading or re-writing of the image (Thomas 2003, 114). Similarly to puzzles that have many pieces which must be unified, essay film fragments functions in a non-linear montage that demands the viewer's intellectual act on the production of meaning.

In his 1989 film called *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, the audience witnesses a situation of unawareness during the period of the Holocaust. Thomas Allan James comments on his work: 'What is preserved, inscribed, in this image [see Image 8] is destruction itself, a destruction more vast than any image can show. It cannot be seen in the image, and thus it must be read in it, and nevertheless in this reading it is destroyed, thematized, produced as an object of knowledge' (Thomas 2003, 114). The film focuses on the 'blind spots' in the interpretation of aerial photographs taken during an American bombing raid in 1944 of an industrial plant in Germany. Only decades later, when the photos were analyzed by the CIA, was it realized that the Auschwitz concentration camps were also captured in these images (see Image 8). Farocki shows the links between war and photography, exploring how perception during times of conflict is conditioned by what people want or don't want to see, rendering observers as either passive accomplices or victims in times of war. Farocki looks at what is not visible at the first glance and creates a discourse over the invisible incidents which can be reflected through an essayistic format. The war and the holocaust exist but the viewer has to find the right angle in the

imagery to reveal the hidden truth behind.



Image 8: Scene from *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* by Farocki

According to Blümlinger (2003), the linearity of image progressions is suspended or at least subjected to a relative interpretation. She highlights that the spatial arrangement of images challenges the viewer to discover new ways of seeing. She focuses on how Farocki creates a new visual structure with the use of cinema as videographic theater context to employ the medium of video in the inherent potentiality by changing spatial contexts. His viewers are 'the viewers who make pictures' (Duchamp, quoted in Blümlinger 2003,106). Therefore, the viewer has the option and the responsibility of seeing and perceiving, to make the big picture from the puzzle pieces in order to take part in the collective essay film experience (see Image 9). This essay film experience in Farocki's work might be conceptualized as a theatrical situation where the spatialized presentation of the images 'facing' each other at right angles, and the viewer has the task of finding a point of view. In this case, there is a shift of focus taking place in the viewer's gaze that creates a dialogue between the moving image sequences, constantly emphasizing the presence of

that which is not visible at a given moment (Blümlinger 2003, 106).



Image 9: Scene from *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* by Farocki

To quote Blümlinger, 'the artist's arguments are expressed in a montage between imagery and concept, that is, between, on the one hand, the sensory space opened by the image trace and the random noises and, on the other hand, abstract space generated by the intertitles and interview passages of offcamera' (Blümlinger 2003, 100). Following this montage, it is possible to see the part of responsibility delivered to the viewer while positioning him/her as a witness of a critical situation. Through the abstraction of audiovisuals in this sensory space and the very notion of witnessing, the director attempts to widen the passive position of the audience into an intellectual witness with the aim of collectively sharing the revealed information. Farocki's work opens up to a new kind of viewing in order to discover what is hidden in the visual material. In his work, with the awareness of his own gaze as a creator towards the visual material, Farocki reflects the gaze back to the viewer.

Conclusion

Rascaroli sees the spectator of the essay film as the one who is invited to enter into dialogue with the enunciator, to follow their reasoning, and to respond by actively participating in the construction of meaning (Rascaroli 2011, 4). The meaning in the essay film is not delivered to the viewer directly; rather it is opened⁶ up for a collective act, with a dialogical attitude. When it is presented for the witnessing of a director's journey in many essay films, the director positions himself right next to the audience to solve things, heal traumas, or express feelings with the support of being a distanced spectator of personal material. The author positions himself within the audience as a part of the essay film experience to stay open for further perceptions while the director discovers he is the spectator of his own film, he is on the same plane as the audience. This self positioning of the essayist differentiates the essay form entirely from other genres, due to the positioning of the author and the self-reflexive representation of his/her worldview or concerns. The editing process and the sonic elements serve these intellectual expectations in order to create a dialogue between the essayist and the spectator.

⁶ Rascaroli explores the openness of the essay film as an interstitial space between the text on which the essay film comments and the audience it addresses in first-person and essayistic nonfiction.

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This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal*

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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